

Killing for Girls: Predation Play and Female Empowerment

Author: Elena Bertozzi, Associate Professor, Director Digital Game Design & Development, Long Island University, Post Campus

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Bio:

Elena Bertozzi has taught game design and development for many years. Her research focus is on play and gender and how they relate to technophilia, technophobia and competence. She is always trying to figure out how to attract more women to this demanding, highly competitive field.

Abstract

Predation games--games in which the player is actively encouraged and often required to hunt and kill in order to survive—have historically been the purview of male players. Females, though now much more involved in digital games than before, generally play games that stress traditionally feminine values such as socializing with others, shopping and nurturing. This paper argues that playing games that virtually simulate predation has many benefits for female players. Predation play teaches participants how to survive and succeed in stressful, competitive, aggressive environments. To remain in the game, players have to understand and enjoy the acquisition and negotiation of power, learn to face fear, willingly accept challenges, and accept the inevitability of failure without allowing it to deter future attempts. Through predation play, females can learn to excel in and enjoy high-risk high-reward environments. The author proposes that such play might help address gender disparities outside of play.

Despite enormous strides in many areas, women continue to be significantly underrepresented in positions of power, authority, status and wealth such as high-level political positions, tenured faculty in STEM¹ disciplines, CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, and partners in law firms (Hill, Corbett, & Rose, 2010; National Association of Women Lawyers, 2011; United States Department of Commerce, 2011). Attaining such positions requires participation in intensely aggressive and competitive environments. When the stakes are high, the knives are sharp. Power positions are often attained not by those who are best qualified, but those who have mastered the skills required to thrive in aggressively competitive environments (Babcock & Laschever, 2003; Pfeffer, 2010). Females' lack of such skills is reflected in the persistence of stubborn stereotypes of what it means to be a girl:

'Run your feet! ... Again! ... We are going to get the girl out today.' ... Heads collided, and, after a few more minutes of struggle, the players toppled. 'O.K., we got half the girl out,' Toal said. 'Now let's see if we can get the **other** half out.' He ordered the same kid back to the line. 'You're going to stay here until you become a football player!' he shouted. 'The only guy who is going to help you is you. Again!'

Journalist Ben McGrath observing and quoting high school football coach Greg Toal (2012)

It is no surprise to find that in the traditionally masculine world of football, the word 'girl' continues to connote a person who is weak, afraid of pain, lacks independence and is an object of scorn. However it is clear from Sheryl Sandberg's (World Economic Forum & Bloomberg, 2012) recent remarks and those of other prominent females, that women themselves feel uncomfortable with ambition and power: "A consensus

¹ Science, technology, engineering and mathematics

emerged from the discussions at the 2011 Power Summit² that the discomfort many women feel with the concept of power may stem as much from women's own internal gender bias as it does from external gender bias'' (Chanow & Rikleem, 2012, pg. 11) For many years women's organizations have fought to change institutions so that the work environment is more conducive to equality and there are more opportunities for females to succeed. The statistics show that this is not enough. Power is never given away freely. It must be fought for and once achieved, it must be defended from those who would take it away (Douglass, 1985).

Strategies for understanding, obtaining and defending power are learned through play—kinds of play that have long been the domain of males (Yalom, 2004). As long as such play was primarily physical, it was difficult for females to compete on the same playing field. Videogames have created an opportunity unforeseen by Title IX. This paper argues that predation videogames in particular can provide females with a safe environment in which to learn and practice specific skills. Predation play is not a game genre, but it is a useful descriptor. We can consider as predation play, games in which the player's representation (the main character or player avatar) finds itself in a situation where it is under attack by enemies seeking to eliminate it from the game environment and where the player is motivated by in-game rewards to respond with equivalent violence to achieve the goals of the game (Bertozzi, 2012). Predation game worlds make power struggles explicit because power is stripped down to the bare essentials of life and death. Is the player willing to do what is necessary to survive? Is the player able to learn the

² In 2011 the Center for Women in Law at the University of Texas at Austin organized this summit to address the lack of females in leadership and top positions in the legal profession.

strategies needed for success in specific environments? In predation play, the player is motivated by the game world to learn what needs to be done to excel in the game and learns to enjoy the process of doing so. These are important lessons for females.

Videogames that simulate predation—games in which the player is being hunted by others and must kill to survive—have long been the province of young males. The majority of First Person Shooter (FPS) players are male and males are in the majority of the Role-Playing (RPG) and Massively Multi-Player Online Role Playing (MMPORG) games that involve intense predation (Griffiths, Davies, & Chappell, 2004; Jansz & Tanis, 2007; Lucas & Sherry, 2004). There are many reasons for this, including the fact that heteronormative female development dissuades females from aggressive, competitive behavior and especially play that includes weapons (Bertozzi, 2008; Butler, 1990; Cassell & Jenkins, 1998). Females are much more likely to play games that stress traditionally feminine values such as self-beautification, shopping, pro-social behavior and nurturing (i.e. *Sims*, *Farmville*). Playing games that virtually simulate predation (which is true of most violent videogames) has many benefits for female players. Predation play teaches participants how to survive and excel in stressful, competitive, aggressive environments. Players must acquire skills germane to the specific game world, learn to stay calm and focused in the face of concerted attacks and terrifying situations, learn (both individually and with other players) how to marshal weapons and other resources to address the strategies of a variety of opponents, and accept the inevitability of (simulated) death and defeat without allowing it to deter them from playing again.

There is much debate over how to encourage and support females who seek positions of power and authority. Many institutions and

individuals have made recommendations. The American Association of University Women released a report which presents data demonstrating that variations in achievement in the sciences appear to be based on environmental and cultural factors rather than biological ones. They report that:

One of the largest gender differences in cognitive abilities is found in the area of spatial skills, with boys and men consistently outperforming girls and women. Spatial skills are considered by many people to be important for success in engineering and other scientific fields. Research highlighted in this report, however, documents that individuals' spatial skills consistently improve dramatically in a short time with a simple training course. If girls grow up in an environment that enhances their success in science and math with spatial skills training, they are more likely to develop their skills as well as their confidence and consider a future in a STEM field. (Hill et al., 2010 pg. xv)

Many males develop spatial skills by playing predation games in complex 3D environments with multiple levels and maps (Boot, Kramer, Simons, Fabiani, & Gratton, 2008). Games such as *Halo*, *Call of Duty* and *Half Life* situate the player in large-scale virtual environments. Players operate a first or third person avatar and have to manipulate the avatar body, objects and multiple types of weaponry within an extremely detailed game environment in order to survive. The process of doing so requires the ability to mentally map the gameworld and objects within it in ways that actually rewire the brain (Blakeslee & Blakeslee, 2007; Dye, Green, & Bavelier, 2009). The AAUW report suggests that girls be given Legos™ and Erector Sets™ to play with, but makes no mention of the potential of videogame play. The lack of such a suggestion actually reinforces the cultural stereotype that the authors themselves decry. Predation video games are possibly the most technologically sophisticated, intellectually challenging environments currently available

for the engagement of young minds and they are not even mentioned as arenas in which young female minds might be trained; this despite the fact that there is data to support their usefulness in doing so (Feng, Spence, & Pratt, 2007).

Speaking in Davos, Facebook's Sheryl Sandberg reiterated the statistics that women are stuck at 15% or less in the most powerful roles in the developed world. She stated that females are raised to be less ambitious than males, that they are told to focus on being pretty rather than being smart and that if they assert themselves and seek to lead (as she and similarly powerful women do) they are pejoratively described as "bossy." (World Economic Forum & Bloomberg, 2012). Her remarks unfortunately include few useful suggestions for changing the status quo, however they reiterate the strength of existing stereotypes and their effects on women. It is very difficult to battle such stereotypes largely because they are internalized. Stereotype threat³ (Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999) is increasingly recognized as a factor resulting in a vicious circle which is very difficult to break. Those who study stereotype threat argue that the best way to break the circle is to provide models of figures who defy the stereotype, and increase the numbers of the minority population (Mehl, Vazire, Ramírez-Esparza, Slatcher, & Pennebaker, 2007; Vedantam, 2012). Predation videogame play is an opportunity for making progress on both fronts. Although there are valid concerns about stereotypical and misogynistic depictions of females in videogames, the industry has changed. There is now no lack of representation of competitive, capable fighting women inside game worlds. They have

³ Stereotype threat is the finding that when a person's social identity is attached to a negative stereotype, that person will tend to underperform in a manner consistent with the stereotype. The underperformance is attributed to a person's anxiety that he or she will conform to the negative stereotype.

always been outnumbered by male heroes, but it is not difficult to find and play as females such as Ms. Pac-Man (Bally, Midway, & General Computer Corporation, 1981), Perfect Dark in the eponymous game (Hollis, 2000), Hildegarde von Krone in *Soul Caliber IV (Project Soul, 2008)*, Lara Croft in any of the *Tomb Raider* games (Gard, 1996), Samus from the *Metroid* series (Miyamoto, Miki, & Mann, 2002), Commander Shepard from *Mass Effect (Bioware, 2007)*, or any of the female avatars from fighting games such as the *Street Fighter* series or *Dead or Alive 4*. Females who do begin to play predation games will find that there are also ever more talented and vocal women who already play these games and advocate for more women to join them (Miller, 2011).

In the same vein as Sandberg, McGregor chides women for prioritizing concerns about body weight and attractiveness over career achievement (Money Penny & McGregor, 2012). Both women point out that the cultural pressures on females to adhere to heteronormative ideas of what constitutes female attractiveness have retained their strength despite many attempts to change them. Participation in virtual worlds allows females the possibility of freeing themselves from cultural norms at least for the duration of gameplay. The relative prettiness or Body Mass Index of the human operating an avatar in a predation game is completely irrelevant. A student of the author's wrote the following in a paper analyzing why she enjoys playing a game that depicts and glorifies football violence:

When I played physical football with my brothers, the playing field was equal. In their eyes, we were all equal before the game (Huizinga, 1950). However, playing football with other boys my age who were not my brothers, made me feel everything but equal. This is one of the reasons I feel that I became so entranced in playing *Madden NFL*, because with any guy I was playing against I felt equal on the digital playing field.

Another aspect of *Madden NFL* that particularly drew me into playing the game was the opportunity to experience football in a different way. While playing *Madden NFL*, I could easily tackle and crush my opponents, something that I could not do in reality. In analog play, my parents would sometimes admonish my brothers for tackling me so hard etc. My aggressive behavior felt more accepted in playing *Madden NFL*, than it felt while playing the analog version. (Aiello, 2011)

Playing violent videogames necessarily draws the player's attention away from looking inward (focus on the self) and moves it outward toward an external goal. Predation play requires intense concentration on keeping the avatar alive in a difficult environment (Green & Bavelier, 2003).

Power and competition

Predation teaches players important skills that are applicable outside of game play and which can be very useful for females. Female children are often taught to prioritize nurturing and pro-social behaviors and are dissuaded from engaging in overt competition (Fallon & Jome, 2007; Gill, 1986). Though there are certainly benefits to traditionally female values, they do not have to come at the expense of, or a lack of appreciation for, predation play. Competition is an inevitable part of life and women who have experience with it are more likely to be successful, particularly in competitive workplaces (Evaldsson, 2003; Felix Oberholzer-Gee, Joel Waldfogel, & White, 2003; Hall, 1996).

In report on why female chemistry PhDs in the United Kingdom leave academia, the following were listed among the reasons they did so:

Been uncomfortable with the culture of their research group (about working patterns, time and expectations and

the level of competition between group members), especially where the culture was particularly 'macho';

Come to believe the competition for a permanent academic post was too fierce for them to compete successfully;(Newsome, 2008, pg. 7)

These findings suggest that females in this environment do not feel comfortable in a competitive environment. In the previously cited report on paucity of top-level female lawyers, participants in the Power Play summit determined that the best means for effecting positive change are: "seven strategies for getting, using, and keeping power" (Chanow & Rikleen, 2012). These strategies include cultivating a willingness to explicitly seek and grasp power, understanding that there is always competition for scarce resources and that power must be fought for, and the need for perseverance and determination in the pursuit of this goal.

Predation in play creates a learning scenario where the player dies almost immediately if she does not compete by quickly learning the environment and how to behave inside of it. The threat of death creates a situation of concentrated intensity that is very conducive to learning and evolving because the game creates a feeling of pressure that requires the player to act under conditions that simulate intense competition in the real world. Many predation games are so challenging that it is very difficult to become competent at playing them by oneself. Resources exist to help players, including cheats and online help guides. However the best way to become competent at these games is by working with other players either in cooperative online environments or playing with friends. Games like *World of Warcraft*, for example are guild based and have a long tradition of strong female players (Eklund, 2011; Lehtonen, 2007). There are strong individual female players and teams of females who play games such as *Call of Duty* and document the process in such a way as to advertise their skill and encourage other women to

join them (Castillo, 2010; Haniver, 2012). Playing predation games is way to experience pleasure in the process of acquiring and practicing the use of power. Competitive environments are daunting to those who feel as though they lack the ability to succeed within them. When those skills are acquired, then accepting the challenge can be a thrill.

Facing Danger/ Experiencing Fear as an incentive

Most predation games begin with the player in the center of an area with where some of the other digital actors are allies and some are antagonists. Players have to immediately determine where to go, what weapons to use and what strategies to employ in order to stay alive. This creates a feeling of tension and charged anticipation. Game experiences can alternate between dealing with a continuous onslaught of enemies who must be stopped in order for the player to survive and quieter periods of exploration and assessment. Generally though, predation play environments require constant vigilance and attention to detail. Players are often killed and have to re-spawn many times before they are able to figure out how to stay alive. This process of putting oneself in a situation that is difficult and dangerous, learning how to adapt and enduring defeat is very instructive. Becoming even an average player requires hours of experience in the world and often the help of expert players willing to form alliances with a newbie. Learning how to survive in predatory game worlds teaches players to persevere in the face of hardship, carefully consider and stockpile resources, recognize the difference between friends and enemies and the value of strategic alliances (CCP Games, 2008).

Predation play environments are very often terrifying. They are inhabited by all manner of monsters, zombies and other nightmarish creatures. But the player learns to face fear and vanquish it through the process of defeating enemies. Such play environments are carefully calibrated to create pleasurable tension and empower players to resolve it by increasing skills, self-confidence and self-efficacy. It is much more satisfying to defeat a formidable enemy than one that wasn't much of a challenge. Predation play habituates players to controlled risk and thrill-seeking in a safe environment. Once this is practiced through play, players may feel more empowered and able to face tense environments outside of game worlds. Recent studies have demonstrated that people who have to perform highly skilled, high-risk tasks such as surgery benefit from practicing and habituating themselves to such environments through video game play (Rosser et al., 2007).

Death and defeat—It is all part of the game

When the avatar kills or dies in predation games, the game often generates gory animations complete with flying body parts, blood and gruesome sound effects. Many games appear to revel in showing the deterioration of the body in death in the greatest possible detail. These animations are in fact the grounds for a great deal of the public's dismay with this form of entertainment (Roberts, 2005). However it could be argued that such animations are not a glorification of real death and violence, but rather the way that virtual death and defeat are acknowledged in virtual worlds (Sutphin, 2009). Such animations can help players deal with the inevitability of setbacks and defeat in any challenging environment. Gory death animations are a form of aggressive negative feedback that help players deal with failure (ok, you killed me, now we get to watch this cool animation) and celebrate the virtual

vanquishing of a formidable enemy (ok, now I killed you and we get to watch this great animation). In predation play, the emphasis on the death/failure of the player, is followed by the rebirth/re-spawning of the player who then has the opportunity to try again. Each new attempt at beating the game after a death is an act of will to persist in the face of opposition and negative feedback.

Another of the reasons given by female participants (in the UK study) for leaving a career in science was: “Developed concerns about poor (though normal) experimental success rates, apprehensive of what this may infer to others about their skills and competence” (Newsome, 2008, pg. 7). Predation games require players to routinely confront the fact of virtual death--which is a metaphor for temporary failure or setback-- and therefore accept it. Part of the appeal of predation games is that although the experience is a simulation, the player experiences it in an environment that is extremely immersive, convincing and compelling. The player hunts and is hunted, is both predator and prey. Playing these games provides the player with experience in environments in which the stakes are high and the tension is palpable. Loss, failure and defeat are inevitable when engaging in predation. When the predation is played rather than real, the player can learn to accept and rebound from defeat rather than be crushed by it.

Enjoying the feeling of hunting and being hunted

Another possible reason for the current lack of female participation in predation play is that those who routinely experience *real* predation—those who actually experience or have experienced the feeling of being hunted—may not enjoy replicating this sensation in play. It is too close to the real. One of the philosophical fundamentals of play is that it is separate from everyday life (Huizinga, 1955). Play is fun because it takes us away

from our everyday experience and provides us with a sacred space, a playground, in which we can experience a different world. Females often experience the world as a place in which they are objects of predation (Whitzman, 2007). They are much more likely to be sexually harassed, raped, and physically assaulted, often by males they know (Avegno, Mills, & Mills, 2009). This could be a factor in determining whether or not females enjoy playing in environments that simulate predation. Similarly those who have had a negative experience of predation in circumstances such as wars might not enjoy replicating the experience in a play environment.

However, predation play can be used to empower those who feel powerless – at the mercy of predators – by teaching them how to respond successfully to predation. Video games that simulate war have been used by therapists treating soldiers with PTSD (Rizzo et al., 2009). Females who learn martial arts or who routinely trounce their male opponents in *Halo* might feel less vulnerable to male sexual predation outside of game worlds. One activist, Suyin Looui, developed the video game *Hey Baby* which both demonstrates how frightening sexual harassment can be and provides players with an aggressive defense to it (Looui, 2010). All types of predation play allow the player to experience being both prey and predator. Female players have the opportunity to feel in control of a given situation and as though they have the resources and intelligence to respond proactively to acts of aggression.

Predation play also teaches enlightened self-interest. The experience of being both prey and predator teaches the player how to do what is needed to survive- both in the environment and in the social group. The player has to acquire the skills to perform complex in-game tasks even when under virtual attack, confront fear of failure and move through it or use it to attain goals. The predator learns that those around

him/her can be trusted to the extent that they are also acting with enlightened self interest and will act to increase their own ranking and that of the group until those two conflict and then that person will make a decision. Predators have to learn to read one another to try to figure out what that decision will be and how they need to respond to protect themselves.

Females are often trained not to publicly act with enlightened self-interest. Much of the acculturation of young girls is focused on personal appearance, sharing and caring for others (Grosz, 1994; Hrdy, 1999). Females are often penalized for overt competitiveness and discouraged from participation in predator play (Roth, 2004; Ryan, 1995). Given that females are just as interested as males in achieving their goals, female competition tends to be hidden and subversive (Simmons, 2002; Warner, 1999). If females do not compete openly and fairly, they may not have many of the skill sets described in this paper. Further, they may be unpredictable in highly competitive situations if they refuse to compete, or act unpredictably. They might make choices that appear totally irrational because their priorities differ from those of their competitors. This makes it very difficult for others to interact with them in these situations. By engaging in predation play, females might find male behavior more comprehensible and be better able to compete with them (Kolata, 2011).

The number of women willingly placing themselves in real predation environments continues to increase. Over the last decade, the military has integrated more and more women into combat situations. This is due partly to the fact that war has changed and even though women are not technically supposed to be front-line combatants, they often find themselves in that position. But women themselves have lobbied forcefully to be more fully engaged in combat and have demonstrated that they have the skills to do so successfully (Love, 2011).

On the cultural front, several recent films and television shows feature overtly aggressive, strong, competitive female protagonists. In these stories women are portrayed as having all the predatory instincts of males and they carry out violence that appears justified within the context of the story of the film. These include the Bride in *Kill Bill*, Yu Shu Lien in *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*, Lisbeth Salander in Stieg Larsson's enormously popular *Girl With ...* series, and, Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games*. The female protagonists in these films are portrayed as engaging in a difficult struggle against opponents who wish to cause them harm. They are complex, interesting characters who, while sexually attractive (as many male lead characters are), respond with equivalent violence to protect/revenge themselves and others. This differs dramatically from earlier film portrayals of aggressive women who were willing to use violence to achieve their goals and were portrayed as manic stereotypes (i.e. Glenn Close's character in *Fatal Attraction*, any female Disney villain, and Juliette Lewis in *Natural Born Killers*). Television depictions of females are also changing. Currently the series *Bones* and *Body of Proof* both feature female scientists who work with dead bodies and hunt down killers on a daily basis while apparently unfazed either by the gruesome nature of the materials they are handling or the perils of the job. The female detective star of *Prime Suspect* (based on the British series that was seen as a milestone for the depiction of a woman in a man's world (Jermyn, 2003)) is frequently depicted as using her weapons and body to be aggressive in much the same way her male costars do. In fact she is severely beaten in the face in the first episode in way that seems to be making a very clear statement about being willing to put her appearance on the line for the sake of doing the dangerous job she has chosen to perform (Berg, 2011)⁴. Perhaps these shifts in the societal

⁴ This show, like *The Chicago Code* which featured a female Police Commissioner,

attitudes towards women who engage in real predation and more accurate media representations of such women will encourage more predation play among females.

Engaging females in predation play

Encouraging women to start playing predation games is a challenge for many reasons. Such games have long been the target of critics who blame such games for a whole litany of noxious effects ranging from player obesity. Another very serious issue is the persistence of a misogynistic, aggressively anti-female culture among some male players (O'Leary, 2012). But this should come as no surprise. The world of highly competitive game play is aggressive and abrasive. Male players routinely insult, flame and otherwise virtually attack each other in the process of playing predation games. Part of being able to stay in the game is figuring out how not to let such behavior distract a player from excelling. The best response to such taunts is to be the name at the top of the kills list.

Predation play is practice for complex, high-stress environments in which resources are scarce and there is competition for who will attain them. If aggressive competition is overt, regulated and fair, engaging in it can sharpen the mind and hone the talents of those who participate in it. Learning how to find enjoyment in doing so is good practice for succeeding in similar non-play environments. Encouraging females to play at the same kinds of digital games males do may finally affect female willingness to seek and achieve the same kinds of power and status of top males. To accomplish this, parents and educators have to recognize the importance of predation play for the future success of female children. It is difficult, but not impossible to change cultural norms. Title IX has made

was cancelled after its first season due to lack of viewership. They are breaking new ground, but it may take time for audiences to catch up.

an enormous difference in the participation of females in rigorous, challenging physical sports. We need to make equivalent efforts in digital play and recognize the connection between play and performance (Goldstein, 2012) in convincing females to seek out such challenges.

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